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REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS

Report of the Secretary-General

I. PROGRESS IN THE CENTRAL AMERICAN PEACE PROCESS

1. The International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) constitutes an important initiative in the context of the concerted search for regional peace by the Central American Presidents, with the support of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The signature on 7 August 1987 of the procedures for the establishment of a firm and lasting peace in Central America (Esquipulas II agreement (A/42/521-S/19085, annex)), marked a major advance in the peace process. An underlying principle of this agreement was that peace and development were inseparable. In addition, the Central American Presidents recognized that a durable peace could not be obtained without a solution to the problem of uprooted populations.

2. The special plan for economic cooperation for Central America (A/42/949, annex), formulated as a response to the above concerns, contains a chapter on emergency assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons. That chapter is defined as the Concerted Plan of Action, adopted by CIREFCA at Guatemala City in May 1989 (see A/44/527 and Corr.1 and 2, annex) of which the Development Programme for Displaced Persons, Refugees and Returnees (PRODERE) forms an integral part.

3. Significant progress has since been registered in the regional peace process, notably through the ending of hostilities and initiation of national reconciliation in Nicaragua, the conclusion of the peace accords in

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El Salvador and the ongoing search for peace in Guatemala. Diplomatic support for CIREFCA's objectives has continued to be registered, as evidenced in the Final Communiqué of the San José VIII Summit between Foreign Ministers of the European Economic Community (EEC) and Central American countries, held at Lisbon in February 1992. More recently, the Organization of American States (OAS), at its twenty-second General Assembly meeting, commended the contribution of CIREFCA to the regional peace process, in its resolution of 18 May 1992.

II. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CIREFCA CONCERTED PLAN OF ACTION

A. Evolution of the situation of uprooted Central Americans

4. Through CIREFCA, the participating countries (i.e. the five Central American countries, Belize and Mexico) attempted to quantify, through national surveys, the impact and scope of the phenomenon of refugee, returnee and displaced populations. The conclusion reached (and presented to the May 1989 Conference) was that an estimated total of 2 million persons, comprising CIREFCA's target population, had been affected by regional conflicts over the past two decades. Of this total, some 150,000 were recognized refugees and 61,500 were repatriates. The Conference recognized, however, that the regional conflicts had also caused significant internal and external population displacement. These last two categories were estimated to involve roughly 1.8 million of the total uprooted population in the region.

5. Between May 1989 and June 1992, the situation of CIREFCA target populations evolved substantially. At present returnees outnumber refugees in the region. Official estimates of the number of refugees now total 103,250, of whom some 90 per cent are in Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico.

6. One of CIREFCA's main achievements has been the promotion and realization of voluntary repatriation in conditions of security and dignity. By the end of December 1991, 107,170 Central Americans had returned to their countries of origin, mostly to Nicaragua (64 per cent), El Salvador (25 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala.

7. Assessing the exact number of internally displaced persons remains a difficult task. According to government estimates, this group totalled some 658,000 persons at the end of 1991. The majority are concentrated in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The number of externally displaced persons is even more difficult to estimate: in Belize there are approximately 28,000, of whom at least 20,000 could be eligible for refugee status, and in Costa Rica some 80,000. Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico acknowledge the existence of externally displaced persons, although without giving any figures.

8. Peace and reconciliation processes have in turn given rise to new population displacements in certain countries. Increasingly, other categories of persons are being included in efforts to address the problem of the

uprooted, such as war victims, the handicapped and those demobilized, many of whom are now returning to their communities of origin.

9. It is estimated that CIREFCA projects cover about one third of the target population. These programmes are increasingly aimed at achieving integrated solutions and strengthening the capacity of receiving communities, without discrimination between the various groups. The PRODERE programme, for example, indirectly benefits over 700,000 persons located in 50 municipalities of six countries. Direct beneficiaries of PRODERE total some 320,000 persons, of whom some 10 per cent are refugees and returnees.

B. CIREFCA as a basis of coordinated action

10. A key feature of the CIREFCA Plan of Action is its origin in an accord between the five Central American countries, Belize and Mexico, the international community, the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations, thus contributing to the regional peace process. The Conference recognized that durable solutions for uprooted populations could only be found through agreement between all concerned parties, in the framework of a dynamic process adaptable to the changing reality in the region.

11. As a result, the Plan contains various commitments related to basic principles of refugee law, humanitarian assistance and social and economic development, with clear mechanisms for follow-up and verification. The enunciation of these commitments is complemented by policies and strategies to achieve durable solutions in a strictly humanitarian and apolitical context.

C. Evolution of specific policies for the uprooted

12. At national level, the convening countries have adopted policies to regularize the situation of refugees, repatriates and the displaced. In Belize, the Refugee Act was promulgated in 1991, Honduras has acceded to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and to its 1967 Protocol, while Costa Rica has decreed an amnesty period of one year to permit externally displaced persons to regularize their status. El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have initiated measures to facilitate the legal reintegration of returnees, especially as regards documentation. In Mexico, it is expected that implementing legislation will shortly be passed to give effect to reforms benefiting refugees.

D. CIREFCA follow-up mechanisms

13. The combination of humanitarian and developmental initiatives, the balance of which would change as the CIREFCA process evolved, was thought to require "a follow-up mechanism able to focus [fully] on the needs of the beneficiary groups and solve them in an expeditious and flexible manner".

These mechanisms were thus established at the national, regional and international levels. At the regional and international levels, the Plan of Action required that the seven convening countries, with the support of the United Nations, through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), would constitute a follow-up committee.

14. Under the alternating presidency of each of the seven countries, the Follow-up Committee was set up to evaluate the direction of the Plan of Action and to coordinate actions of additional support for uprooted populations.

15. Since May 1989, the Committee has met regularly at regional level, serving as a forum for addressing issues such as support for peace initiatives, human rights and the incorporation of non-governmental organizations into the CIREFCA process to complement government efforts and the problem of access to land.

16. The Follow-up Committee has also held two major meetings at the international level: in New York in June 1990 and in San Salvador in April 1992. On these occasions, the convening countries presented an analysis of progress achieved in the implementation of the CIREFCA Plan of Action (A/44/527, annex, paras. 40 and 41), a reappraisal of national priorities concerning uprooted populations and the resulting needs for international support.

17. With the aim of supporting national processes of reconciliation and reconstruction and improving implementation of CIREFCA projects or redesigning unfinanced projects, national committees have been established in each of the convening countries. In most cases, planning and/or development ministries are represented to ensure integration of uprooted populations within national development plans.

18. To guarantee the return of uprooted persons in conditions of security and dignity, tripartite commissions, consisting of representatives of countries of origin and asylum and UNHCR, have proven particularly successful. In some cases, bi-national technical teams have been created to resolve specific problems such as passage at the frontier, recognition of studies undertaken abroad and documentation problems.

19. The support groups foreseen in the Plan of Action have proved useful in harmonizing criteria and finalizing project proposals, and in some cases, they have dealt with broader humanitarian issues. The preparation of the Second International Meeting of the Follow-up Committee strengthened relations between Governments and the international community.

20. Non-governmental organizations have played a fundamental role in the implementation of the Plan of Action. Their participation, in project implementation and advocacy on behalf of the uprooted, has been facilitated by the establishment of the Regional Association of Central American Non-Governmental Organizations, and support provided by the international

community and the United Nations system. In most countries, non-governmental organizations assisted in the formulation of projects for presentation to the Second International Meeting of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee.

E. CIREFCA as a resource-mobilization platform

21. CIREFCA has also functioned as an important platform for mobilization of additional, non-reimbursable resources for the region. During the First International Meeting of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee, held in New York in June 1990, the convening countries presented 59 priority projects with external financing requirements of $161 million. A total of 34 projects received total or partial funding of $65 million and are at present being implemented. In addition, an amount of $115 million was pledged by the Government of Italy to finance the PRODERE project. It is also estimated that some $60 million has been channelled directly through non-governmental organizations for CIREFCA projects.

22. Funds mobilized for national projects, the Italian contribution to PRODERE, funds for regional support activities and those channelled through non-governmental organizations are estimated to total some $245 million. This amount does not include contributions from the United States of America, Canada, EEC and Japan towards the International Verification and Support Commission, which, between 1990 and 1991, amounted to $45 million.

F. Progress in project implementation

23. To evaluate progress achieved and to measure the impact of CIREFCA, UNDP, through the CIREFCA Joint Support Unit, undertook a technical evaluation of 50 projects in the seven countries. Of these projects, the majority (72 per cent) were aimed at supporting productive activities, mainly through training, technical assistance and credit. The remaining projects were for infrastructure and/or repair, provision of basic social services and institutional support. Some 40 per cent (20 projects) are implemented through Governments while the rest are mainly implemented through non-governmental organizations.

24. The productive projects have made great progress in the local integration of refugees, mainly in Costa Rica and in the Mexican States of Campeche and Quintana Roo, and in the reintegration of returnees and internally displaced in their communities of origin. The evaluation concluded that the major obstacle for projects aimed at local integration was that of access to land. This problem has seriously affected local integration projects in Chiapas, Mexico, as well as reintegration projects in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Other constraints encountered included structural problems, delays in transfers of funds and coordination difficulties between the various parties.

25. The survey concluded that those projects (excluding PRODERE) aimed at

improving social welfare conditions and the constructing/repairing of basic infrastructure have achieved the following: construction and/or repair of 11,800 individual housing units, mostly in El Salvador, Mexico and Nicaragua; construction and/or repair of 230 schools and 180 health centres, mostly in Mexico. The construction/repair of educational and health facilities has been accompanied by training activities for education and health promoters, and the preparation of over 464.5 kilometres of rural roads, half of which are in El Salvador. In most of the productive and social service/infrastructure projects, beneficiary participation has been crucial to project implementation. Projects executed by non-governmental organizations and PRODERE were found to have achieved a high degree of beneficiary participation.

G. Achievements of the PRODERE programme

26. UNDP is responsible for the execution and coordination of the PRODERE programme, which includes the participation of Agencies such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Health Organization/ Pan American Health Organization (WHO/PAHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and UNHCR. PRODERE's total budget at 31 December 1991 amounted to $33.5 million.

27. PRODERE's integrated territorial approach has focused on activities in 15 separate areas, agreed on with the Governments of the six countries concerned, for populations affected by massive and forced displacement, conflict and poverty. Community-based intervention was aimed at all the urgent human needs of refugees, repatriates, displaced and local populations. Through PRODERE activities concentrated in 50 municipalities, community and sanitation infrastructure has been provided for 255,000 persons, 25,270 persons are involved in productive projects, while over $4.3 million has been invested in credit schemes; support has been provided by 771 skilled technicians and training has benefited 15,944 producers.

28. With regard to education, 143 schools have been built or repaired, and 289 others provided with technical assistance. Cultural integration has been promoted in multi-ethnic societies such as Belize and Guatemala. Teaching activities have benefited a total of 28,000 persons. Cultural preservation has been promoted through 16 cultural centres operating at the municipal level. Through PRODERE's programmes, 62 health centres have been built or repaired while 98 have been provided with technical assistance.

29. The Governments of Nicaragua and Guatemala have decided that activities aimed at uprooted populations, undertaken in the context of national reconciliation and reconstruction programmes, should incorporate the PRODERE methodology. PRODERE has also designed programmes of emergency assistance initially for Guatemalan refugees who had returned from Honduras, thus facilitating their initial reintegration in Yalpemech. In 1992, PRODERE has expanded its coverage of three municipalities in Nicaragua.

30. A key feature of the integrated community development approach is human rights promotion through the "PRODERE regional initiatives", a project under UNHCR's responsibility, which includes legal research activities on the rights of children and uprooted women, as well as seminars for the promotion and dissemination of refugee and humanitarian law principles.

H. New CIREFCA initiatives

31. Again demonstrating the evolving character of CIREFCA, a variety of new initiatives have been designed to address the special needs of women and returnee communities. At the regional level, the First Regional Forum on a Gender Approach to Work with Refugees, Returnee and Displaced Central American Women, held at Guatemala City in February 1992, aimed at calling attention to the special protection and assistance needs of uprooted women, inter alia, by including a gender focus in the planning and execution of CIREFCA projects.

32. A second initiative is the quick impact projects being implemented through UNHCR in Nicaragua on behalf of returnee communities. The quick impact project programme was launched in response to special needs of returnees in countries devastated by years of conflict. Quick impact projects comprise a community approach that goes beyond UNHCR's traditionally limited returnee assistance package and is conceived as the first phase of medium- and longer-term development. Through an integrated circuit of micro-projects, quick impact projects respond to urgent basic needs in the areas of social services and production. Given the success achieved with this programme in Nicaragua, UNHCR is currently initiating such projects in Belize and Guatemala.

I. Coordination between the Secretary-General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Development Programme

33. To support implementation of the Plan of Action, the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, UNHCR and UNDP have established an ad hoc mechanism, the joint task force, to maintain the close contact needed to harmonize policies and actions in support of the regional peace process. The presence of a representative of the Office of the Secretary-General in this body illustrates the relevance of CIREFCA to regional peace initiatives.

J. The CIREFCA Joint Support Unit

34. Through CIREFCA, with its declared objective of linking durable solutions for uprooted populations with economic and social development, the partnership of UNHCR and UNDP has taken on a new dimension. This partnership finds its most dynamic expression in the UNDP/UNHCR Joint Support Unit, funded and staffed by both agencies. On the part of UNHCR, contributions towards the Joint Support Unit since 1989 total $1.8 million, provided by EEC, Finland,

France, Japan, Norway and Sweden. For 1992, the UNHCR budget of the Unit totals $1.2 million. Since 1989, UNDP's total contribution to the Unit has amounted to $1.86 million, funded through core funds and special programme funds provided by Canada, France and Sweden. This amount includes the recent UNDP contribution of $756,000 approved by Governments of the countries participating in the special plan for economic cooperation (see para. 2 above) under project CAM/91/003, "Support to the Concerted Plan of Action".

35. The Unit's main tasks in its two years of operation have covered support for project design at national level, acting as secretariat to the Follow-up Committee, disseminating information on CIREFCA on a regular basis to Governments, donors, non-governmental organizations and UNHCR/UNDP offices and maintaining a data bank of donor contributions to CIREFCA projects.

III. SECOND INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF THE CIREFCA FOLLOW-UP COMMITTEE

36. The Second International Meeting of the CIREFCA Follow-up Committee, held in San Salvador on 7 and 8 April 1992, had the following objectives: to inform the international community of progress achieved in the implementation of the Plan of Action, to present revised project proposals for donor consideration based on changes in the national situation of uprooted populations and to assess the future direction of the CIREFCA process.

37. The Meeting was attended by 36 member States, 18 intergovernmental organizations and 62 non-governmental organizations. The Declaration adopted at the Meeting reaffirmed the validity of the principles and objectives of CIREFCA, recognized CIREFCA's contribution to the regional peace process and established important lines of action for the future. Issues requiring priority attention included protection and documentation of uprooted populations, full incorporation of women in the development process, addressing the situation of internally and externally displaced persons and protection of the environment.

38. Amongst the key decisions adopted at the Meeting was the extension of the time-frame of the process for an additional two years, that is, until May 1994, during which time attention should be given to sustained support for peace and democracy in the region and to the design of a resource mobilization strategy. Finally, the Declaration requested the continued support of the United Nations system, through UNHCR, UNDP and the CIREFCA Joint Support Unit, stressing the need for coordination with other agencies, and stressing the need for closer consultation, especially with donors and non-governmental organizations.

39. At the meeting in San Salvador, a total of $82.67 million was announced by donors, of which $51.55 million were earmarked for CIREFCA projects and $31.12 million towards other initiatives in the framework of CIREFCA. The UNHCR component, covering announcements to both general and special programmes, totalled $11.8 million. In support of these programmes, several

donors dispatched technical missions to the various countries prior to finalizing funding agreements.

The new strategies and proposals

40. It should be noted that the majority of projects presented at the meeting involve an overall approach to local communities affected by the integration or reintegration of uprooted populations. This factor marks a change in emphasis from actions of a humanitarian nature, as initiated at the inception of CIREFCA, to actions in favour of integration into development. For this reason, most of the projects are of a multisectoral nature, aimed at social development, community organization, income-generation and the establishment of infrastructure.

41. The five Central American countries, Belize and Mexico presented a total of 65 projects for donor consideration, with priority external funding requirements of $138 million, as follows: Belize presented 14 projects with external funding requirements of $6.8 million, for local integration of refugees and affected Belizean communities. Costa Rica presented eight projects with external funding requirements of $7.9 million to consolidate local integration.

42. El Salvador put its external funding needs at $47 million covering eight projects for reintegration of returnee and internally displaced populations. Funding requested by Guatemala totalled $18.7 million for six projects aimed at strengthening the capacity of communities affected by the return of refugees from Mexico or the internally displaced. For its part, Mexico requested financing for one project only to consolidate refugee settlement in the State of Chiapas. Requirements submitted by Nicaragua totalled $42.1 million, covering 13 projects, for integration of uprooted populations in zones most affected by the conflict. In the case of Nicaragua and El Salvador, CIREFCA projects form part of the national reconstruction and reconciliation programmes, while in Guatemala CIREFCA is part of the National Fund for Peace (FONAPAZ) Initiative. Alone amongst asylum countries, Belize included refugees in its national development plan.

IV. CHALLENGES AHEAD

43. CIREFCA's primary goal remains the strengthening of the regional peace process. In operational terms this implies an overall improvement in the programmes for the target populations. For the period from 1992 to 1994, the immediate challenges facing CIREFCA are the tasks remaining from its original agenda. In particular, voluntary repatriation of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico should occur within the development process. At the same time, local integration measures for refugees opting to remain in countries of asylum should be consolidated. Moreover, coverage of CIREFCA target populations should include a greater number of internally displaced, whose protection and assistance needs remain largely unaddressed. With the exception of assistance

provided by PRODERE and non-governmental organization projects, this group receives minimal attention and survives in conditions of extreme poverty.

44. National and regional capacity to cope with the problem of population displacement must be further strengthened. This implies that, by the end of the process, uprooted populations are assured of receiving continued attention within the context of national development plans. CIREFCA's priorities for 1992-1994 should thus focus on the following main themes:

(a) Incorporation of uprooted populations in all national and regional development programmes, based on the principles and criteria of the CIREFCA Plan of Action;

(b) Formulation of a fund-raising strategy that guarantees attention to uprooted populations and comprises a combination of humanitarian and developmental funding sources;

(c) Definition of mechanisms for continued agreement between the various parties.